



Connecticut

Holding Power Accountable

Testimony to the Government Administration and Elections Committee

March 10, 2021

In Support of SB 753 AAC THE COUNTING OF INCARCERATED PERSONS FOR PURPOSES OF DETERMINING LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS.

Chairwoman Mae Flexer, Chairman Dan Fox, Ranking members and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections committee. As Executive Director and Board Chair of Common Cause in Connecticut we submit the following testimony on SB 753, AAC The Counting of Incarcerated Persons for Purposes of Determining Legislative Districts.

Common Cause is a nonpartisan, non-profit citizens' lobby that has worked to improve the way Connecticut's government operates since 1971. We have 1.5 million members nationwide and more than 15,000 members and activists in Connecticut. Common Cause in Connecticut has a long history of working to increase transparency in government and advocating for the removal of the corrosive influence of special interest money in government and politics and election reform.

Imagine if you didn't have a say in the selection of your mayor, governor, members of Congress, or even your president -- your power, your place, and your voice in our democracy stripped and appropriated elsewhere. That's what's happening to [thousands of](#) Connecticut residents right now -- as many people involved in the criminal legal system are barred from participating in our democracy.

Connecticut's justice system imprisons Black people at a rate [almost ten times](#) that of whites. Not only are those imprisoned and stripped of their humanity and their voices silenced in elections, our state government exploits their bodies for political gain.

Many people are unaware of how incarcerated populations impact elections. Since the majority of people in prison cannot vote, one would think they do not have an impact at all. However, the opposite is true. When a voting district includes a prison population, the district contains fewer voters and so fewer votes are needed to elect its officials.

That means communities where prisons are built, which are predominantly white and rural, get an outsized say in Congress and in state legislatures at the expense of metropolitan areas and non-white communities. This can produce election results that are unfair and sometimes absurd.

This shameful abuse of incarcerated bodies is called "prison gerrymandering." It lets lawmakers inflate the population of districts and give places with prisons more representation. Politicians elected on these gerrymandered maps can ignore their incarcerated constituents, leaving people in prison with nobody to represent them or hear their concerns.

Prison gerrymandering can also distort equal representation by creating districts that appear to give people of color the ability to elect the candidate of their choice when they actually cannot due to their felony conviction. Reforms to voting laws can aid in this effort as well. Bills like HB 5009 that seek



to restore voting rights to Connecticut's approximately 3,200 people on parole are an important step. But, with 15,500 people behind bars in Connecticut, it is important that *all* justice involved people have the right to vote and are counted in their home district to ensure a full and fair democratic process.

Today, voters in one senate district with a prison have [almost 9% more influence](#) than voters in non-prison districts. Likewise, the majority-white voters in seven house districts had at least 4% more influence than voters in non-prison districts.

As our country wrestles with the horrific legacy of racism in our justice systems, it's time for the Connecticut General Assembly to take a step on a better path forward. Legislative district lines should be drawn in a way that helps ensure that everyone has a voice in our democracy.

Prison gerrymandering makes it more difficult for communities hit hardest by unfair criminal justice practices to change the system. For example, the state is still gouging families of incarcerated people for phone calls. With about [\\$5.5 million in annual](#) phone call profits going to a private corporation, and about \$7.5 million going to state coffers -- Connecticut is charging people in prison more than any other state in the nation, outside of Arkansas. A bill to make these phone calls free continues to be blocked by the Legislature. Connecticut has a chance to break this cycle and demand that people are counted in their home districts -- and put an end to prison gerrymandering.

Connecticut will start redrawing district lines this year. And it is time for the Connecticut General Assembly to chart a new path forward.

Reforms to prison gerrymandering have been [passed](#) in the states of Maryland, New York, Delaware, California, Washington, Nevada, New Jersey, Colorado, Virginia, and most recently, [Illinois](#).

We've been working to ban prison gerrymandering here in Connecticut, [for a long time](#). However, it's time for our elected representatives to stop "trying" and instead finally pass legislation to count incarcerated people at home, rather than the prisons where they are being held.

The General Assembly has the opportunity to repudiate the racist legacy of prison gerrymandering, and pass SB 753 and restore equal representation to our state.

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